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Iran May Turn Chemical Tables on Iraq

The deadly genie of poison gas, once uncorked, is difficult to put back in the bottle, as the Iraqis may learn to their horror.

Iraq used it against the human waves of Iranian troops in early 1984—but now Iraq's sworn enemy, Syria, is providing Iran with deadly chemicals to use in retaliation.

This development is of more than parochial interest. An Iranian capability to use poison gas is bad news for every target of Iranian-backed terrorists—including the United States.

What makes the situation particularly distasteful is that the Syrians were rebuffed when they tried to get chemical weapons for Iran from the Soviet Union but were able to buy the terrible materials from U.S. allies in Western Europe. Here's the story, pieced together by our associate Lucette Lagnado from sources in the Pentagon, Central Intelligence Agency and State Department:

The Syrians have possessed chemical weapons for years, probably since 1973. According to one secret CIA report, Syria was "a major recipient of Soviet chemical weapons assistance" and achieved "the most advanced chemical-warfare capability in the Arab world, with the possible exception of Egypt."

Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union "provided the chemical agents, delivery systems and training that flowed to Syria," according to the CIA. As a result, there was "no need for Syria to develop an indigenous capability to produce chemical-warfare agents or materiel."

This absence of an "indigenous capability" became significant when Iran, unable to respond in kind to the Iraqi poison gas, appealed to Syria for help. The Iranians had been reduced to lobbing back unexploded chemical weapons thrown by the Iraqis.

The Syrians were eager to help—but their suppliers in the Kremlin balked. Iraq is a Soviet arms customer, too, and even the cynical Soviets could hardly supply chemical weapons that would be used against their own chemical weapons.

This didn't stymie the Syrians for long, however. They turned to the West Europeans. The Syrians knew that West Germans had been providing materiel and training to the Iraqis. The CIA, which had an agent in a key position informing it of every step in Iraq's chemical warfare development, knew it, too.

One secret CIA report we've seen states: "West Germans have provided technical assistance [to Iraq] in field trials of nerve agents." In fact, according to the CIA, West German and Swiss companies have been second only to the Soviet government in the proliferation of chemical weapons—and the CIA doesn't buy the suggestion that the West Germans thought they were helping Iraq develop a pesticides industry.

"In many cases," the CIA report said, "the acquiring military force deals directly with firms in the West, principally Swiss and West German, often without the knowledge of the supplier's government. We see only continued growth in this industry."